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How Material Gets Put in Secret Files

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WASHINGTON, April 1 — The following paragraph, taken from a memorandum setting out objectives for the Navy's 1986 budget, was classified "Secret." In its entirety, it read:

"The Navy must continue to attract and retain sufficient numbers of high-quality, skilled and motivated people. Compensation and quality of life improvements must be competitive in the job market. Ways must be found to reduce requirements for administrative functions, reduce personnel turbulence and permanent change of station moves."

In context, the paragraph was one of four under the heading of "General Programming Objectives." One instructed planners to assure that the Navy was ready to fight "today, across the decade and beyond the turn of the century." Another said deployments around the world would continue. A third, also in its entirety, ordered: "Take maximum advantage of our technological superiority." The four paragraphs were in a document given to a reporter by someone who hoped to influence policy. All were marked "Secret."

'Serious Damage' a Measure

Why those paragraphs were classified secret is not exactly clear, for the secret classification, according to Executive Order 12356, "shall be applied to information, the unauthorized disclosure of which reasonably could be expected to cause serious damage to the national security."

Could the disclosure of an effort by the Navy to enlist and keep good sailors be reasonably expected to cause "serious damage" to the national security of the United States?

Or is this a classic case of the extent to which some Government officials abuse, misuse and overuse the authority to keep information secret, thereby rendering the system almost meaningless at times?

Whatever the answers, the Reagan Administration, which has vigorously sought to reduce the flow of Government information into the public domain, seems lately to have concluded that the classification system itself is a part of the problem because so many people, in and out of Government, have lost respect for it.

Meese Is Dubious

The new Attorney General, Edwin Meese 3d, said recently: "We have far too much classified information in the Federal Government. A lot of things which shouldn't be classified are, and therefore there is a kind of ho-hum attitude toward the protection of national security information."

He urged that the system be tightened up "so that only material that really has to be kept secret in the interests of national defense or national security is classified." He asked the news media to cooperate in making sure that information was not "improperly disclosed."

There is considerable evidence that the system has major problems. In the vaults of the Defense Department alone are 1.2 million documents classified "Top Secret," the highest of the routine classifications for information that supposedly would cause "exceptionally grave damage" to national security if it got out.

Information is classified for a variety of reasons, only a few of which relate unquestionably to national security.

A small portion is so marked to prevent technology from falling into the hands of adversaries, to preserve a negotiating position, to conceal military operations, or to protect intelligence sources and methods. Dean Rusk, Secretary of State in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, once estimated that 5 percent of the information fell into those categories.

Much information is classified to obtain advantage in political infighting in a city where, as the cliché holds, information is power. Some documents are stamped "Confidential" to cover up shortcomings, especially in the testing of weapons.

Much of It Is Habit

Large amounts of information are classified out of habit. In Korea, a correspondent asked if an infantry company was at full strength. That information was classified, an officer said. But a chart tacked to the wall behind the first sergeant's desk gave complete details. In the Indian Ocean, an officer aboard the aircraft carrier Constellation was asked when sailors would have liberty in port. Ship movements were classified, he said. But a sailor had a calendar marked: "Perth, 16 days."

Many disclosures of confidential information come from senior officials seeking to influence policy, a budget debate, the outcome of an election.

Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger said in a speech that the Soviet Union had placed listening devices made with American technology near a submarine base. He was seeking to support his case for cutting off the flow of technology. Until then, the discovery of the device had been secret.

Useful for Certain Purposes

For similar reasons, a senior official read to a reporter an analysis of Soviet naval developments from a highly secret assessment. A general gave a reporter a report on Indian dissidents in Nicaragua that was marked "confidential." A lieutenant colonel read a critique of the Salvadoran army that was "secret."

So much is classified that officials cannot keep track of it. The Air Force inadvertently listed in its budget this year a secret aircraft called Aurora, for which it planned to asked $2.3 billion in 1987, compared with $80 million for 1986.

In the invasion of Grenada, the Administration justified its ban on reporters by asserting a need to preserve operational security. So Pentagon photographers filmed a special helicopter that had been kept secret, then handed the result to the networks to broadcast.

Definitions Used for Classification

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WASHINGTON, April 1 — Although no law authorizing Government officials to classify information has been adopted by Congress, an executive order signed by President Reagan on April 2, 1982, permits the following categories:

Top Secret — Information that could cause "exceptionally grave damage to the national security" if released.

Secret — Information that could cause "serious damage to the national security" if released.

Confidential — Information that could cause "damage to the national security" if released.

In addition, there are classifications more sensitive than "top secret" with code names such as "Umbra" that are themselves secret, as are the various categories of information they cover. Some documents are marked for limited distribution or for "eyes only," meaning the addressee alone.

Information dealing with cryptology or nuclear matters has additional categories as does information involving intelligence sources and methods. An old Washington saw holds that the most sensitive classification is "Burn before Reading."